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ABSTRACT

The study--and appreciation--of Black literature should not be allowed to decline, as it did in the period between the Harlem renaissance of the 1920s and the reemphasis of Black literature in the 1960s. In order to assure the continuing study of Black authors, the course in major American fiction writers, taught in most universities, should include Black American writers, especially those after 1900. Two of the many works by Black Americans deserving study are "Cane" by Jean Toomer, which reflects the struggle for identity of the man and the artist, and "Native Son" by Richard Wright, which provides a fictional account of the racial situation in America through the voice of the oppressed--a Black, urban youth. (JM)

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Don't Let It Happen Again:
Let's Keep Blacks in
American Literature

In the 1960's a most exciting phenomenon occurred. Educators, universities, English Departments, and professional bodies, such as the National Council of Teachers of English began to recognize that American education had been remiss in presenting the contributions of Black Americans. English teachers were especially concerned that Black writers had been omitted from the English curriculum. After a certain amount of breast-beating, many repentants called for changes. Arguments then developed over how best to make amends. One group argued that it was better to have Black Studies Departments, African-American Studies Departments, Afro-American literature courses where Blackness could be discussed in isolation. Another segment suggested that the material, in this case, literature, should be presented in the traditional American literature courses, in integration, as it was often referred to, a word which was considered somewhat "dirty" during that time. Most Black scholars insisted that both avenues should be available, separate courses and departments as well as American literature courses which included Black writers.

For a while, it all seemed so promising. Many Black American books which were out of print, were reprinted; new ones were written and published; Black Studies programs erupted, Black or Afro-American literature courses were instituted in nearly all English Departments. American literature texts began to include Black writers; students became familiar with a limited number of Black American authors and discussions on the Black experience enlivened many classrooms. Then, in the 70's, with the decline and cutbacks in educational

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funding and with the accompanying major political changes, the interest in Blackness began to fade.[1] Many universities have now discontinued their Black Studies or African-American Studies Departments, and despite the optimism expressed by Nick Aaron Ford in his survey of Black Studies, I am afraid that a situation may evolve similar to the one that existed before the revolution of the 60's.[2] If we are not diligent, we may discover that Blacks may become non-existent in American literature texts and courses. In conjunction with our Bicentennial year, which is supposed to be a commemoration of America's past and a charting of its future, and in the light of this conference's theme, "The Beginnings," I urge that we assess the situation around us and make a commitment that we not allow Blacks to get lost or neglected again.

May I emphasize that all major ethnic groups must be represented in our American literature offerings, if we are to consider our programs, truly American and that I am in favor of separate African-American literature courses; but I am also keenly aware that interests in Blacks tend to wax and wane in the American experience. Note the Harlem Renaissance of the 20's when Americans seemed somewhat interested in Blacks, but then remember the hiatus which occurred up to the sixties. We cannot permit the rich and varied writings of Black Americans to be rejected or lost again. We cannot permit a generation of students to grow up believing that Black Americans have not contributed to the American literary tradition. It is psychologically destructive to Black American students and is unfair to all students of literature, since such an exclusion denies them an accurate picture of the range and power of American writers. It is my hope that Blacks will continue to appear in the traditional American literature survey courses but I would like to propose another alternative which gives us, as teachers, more control. Since almost all English Departments offer a course called Major American Fiction Writers and in most

instances instructors are given some flexibility in the authors they may use, let us employ this course as our paradigm for retaining the Black experience in American literature. Because this course provides more time for in-depth discussion, the teacher can then focus on the worth of the Black writer as an artist, his place and contribution in the American literary, historical, and intellectual tradition, his depiction of the Black experience, and the author's role and influence in the Black American literary heritage. Since this course includes both Black and white writers, the approach may be comparative and developmental.

Most often in universities, the Major American Fiction Writers course is divided into two parts: Writers from the Beginning to 1900 and Writers from 1900 to World War II. The first course is usually composed of works by James F. Cooper, Edgar A. Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Henry James. The second half treats works by Stephen Crane, Theodore Drieser, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. Rarely has a Black writer been elevated to this group. Because Afro-American like American literature, has followed a general line of development - first, expository, autobiographical, religious, political writings before the more imaginative writings - teachers have felt rather satisfied in not including a Black American writer in the major writers course which deals with pre - 1900 writers. Although basically autobiographical, Frederick Douglass' Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself certainly deserves a place in a major American fiction course of this period. If James Fenimore Cooper's works are treated because they provide the basic myths and beginnings of American fiction, surely Douglass's slim volume serves the same function for Black American fiction and should be taught. As Houston Baker points out, it defines certain "modes, techniques and conventions" that since its time

has played a significant role in the literary tradition of which is a part.[3] In addition, it acquaints the student with a very particular American literary genre, the slave narrative.

But, it is in the period after 1900 that black writers make the most extensive use of the Black experience as sources for imaginative writing. Therefore, at least two Black American authors should be included in an American masterpiece course in this era. The two, I suggest are Jean Toomer, with his enigmatic work, Cane and Richard Wright and his classic, Native Son. To provide students with an opportunity to examine these two quite different Black writers introduces them not only to those features which characterize the oneness of the Black experience in Black American literature but also to the variety of styles and responses which exist in this literary tradition. Jean Toomer, because of his concern with form, symbol, and metaphor has often been cited as a writer who does not write as a Black; on the other hand, Richard Wright has been criticized because of his forceful and rather shocking treatment of what is termed "the Negro Problem." Nevertheless, both writers are classified as Black American authors and are recognized as major influences on later Black American writers.

Briefly, let us look at these two writers and their works in terms of their importance as major fiction writers.

Jean Toomer's Cane, published in 1923, is not as widely known as Richard Wright's Native Son; but it should be.[4] It is a beautiful book, not because it is a perfectly constructed novel, for it is not. Actually, it defies categorization, since it contains both prose and poetry and consists of, as one critic describes it, "sketches, short stories, poems and an avante garde drama."[5] Recently, it has been defined as a poetic novel, one in which the book's major theme grows out of its rhetorical structure.[6] No single character

moves throughout the work unless we give this distinction to the narrator, who in certain parts of the work is more of an observer than a participant - observer. The book is truly different! When I introduce it to students, I warn them that their initial reaction should be one of feeling rather than complete understanding, for the book actually is a song, a narrative song which tells about the personal quest of the author, the experiences of Black people in America, and thirdly, the concerns of the human soul.

The most intriguing fact and the element which has provoked the most critical discussion about Cane has to do with unity in the work. On the surface there appears to be no unity but a close observation of the work will reveal that through a constant yoking together of disparate and opposite elements, Toomer moves toward synthesis. This unity amid diversity is first witnessed in the organization and style of the work. Poems appear throughout Cane, within the prose pieces are snatches of poems and songs, and much of the prose is poetic and impressionistic. The major theme of the book is set forth in one of the early poems "Song of the Son," in which the speaker of the poem says

Thy son, in time I have returned to thee
.....
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone.

The first piece in the first section may be used to illustrate many examples of Toomer's yoking together. "Karintha" is one of the character sketches of six women treated in the first section of the work. The piece begins with a poem describing Karintha's beauty in which the author writes "Her skin is like the dust on the eastern horizon"; portions of this poem become a refrain throughout the prose piece which describes Karintha. The theme of the sketch is set forth in a poetic statement in which the speaker intones: "Karintha is a woman. Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon." Toomer's style and form with its fragmentation and mixture of song,

narrative, and drama appears to be the prelude for the direction of modern literature. It suggests that the literary work, if it is to reflect the change and disparate elements in man's life cannot be satisfied to use one form, but must find a form which shows the confusion, discord, but also harmony in existence.

Cane also represents Toomer's personal search for identity and his dilemma as a Black American writer and artist. In both instances, the author is attempting to reconcile opposites. Having been born of a racially mixed family and possessing a skin color which allowed him to be identified as white, Toomer had difficulty determining his identity. He writes "As for being a Negro, this of course, I am not - neither biologically nor socially." He wished never to be identified with any single race or social group but as an "American" or Man. The writer chose to spend the latter part of his life as a white man. A similar predicament existed in his concern as a writer. Having returned to his ancestral home of Georgia as a young school administrator, he experienced as a result of his contact with the rural Blacks of the South a kind of racial consciousness which served as his inspiration to write Cane. In these "Caroling" souls of slavery, he recognized a kind of beauty, wholeness, and richness of spirit that he felt he had to capture before it was lost as Black Americans became more involved in the urban life. Cane expresses this tension.

Part one portrays the spontaneous, alive, individuals of the canefield while part two provides a contrast of the repressed, frustrated individuals who have migrated north to Washington and Chicago. It must be pointed out that although Toomer makes the distinction between the two worlds, the author, even within the first section is aware of the problems arising in reaction to the natural behavior expressed by his characters. The last section of Cane, "Kabnis" is an attempt to synthesize the experiences of Toomer, the man and

Toomer, the artist. The two themes, self-identity and the dilemma of the Black artist converge. Kabnis, the narrator, now in the South with Blacks finds himself unable to identify with the other Black characters in this drama. Secondly, although Kabnis alludes to being an artist, who has been "shapin words after a design that is branded" on his soul, the scene ends with Kabnis trudging up the stairs, from his convoluted night of the soul, not as an artist of words but as an apprenticed blacksmith. The end of the work hints to the end of Toomer as an artist. Cane remains Toomer's only major work and a beautiful testament of his struggle as an artist.

In addition to Cane's being a semi-tragical lyric of the search of the individual for self, the joys and pains of Black people in America, the dilemma of the Black artist in America, it offers many other notable themes which make the work excellent for teaching. One of particular interest is Toomer's concern with women. Cane is a book about women. For Toomer, women symbolized a life-giving force; they are associated with fertility, the soil, deep roots, giving; they are always attempting to harmonize body and soul. Although frequently treated as sex objects, the women remain unfulfilled and frustrated beings who desire other roles than that of sex partners. Concerning the needs of women, the narrator proves to be one of the most sensitive men characters in all literature. As with all of his themes, in his treatment of women, Toomer is seeking the development of higher consciousness in the individuals and a fusion of opposite elements - in this case, that of the male - female, and the physical and the spiritual. The work portrays the struggle and points to the various forces which impede this unity.

It is impossible to do justice to Toomer's small book, Cane, for the work is a "happening" which requires involvement and participation in it. Described as an interesting, "occasionally beautifully and often queer book"

upon its publication at the start of the Harlem Renaissance, the book has continued to draw scholars and readers to it, although it was out of print for over 25 years. During the 60's it was reprinted. In 1974, in his critical history of Black American literature Roger Whitlow writes: "And now that Cane has been discovered and returned to print once more, no bibliography of American literary masterpieces can be complete without it."[8] I add that not only should it be included in our bibliographies, but should be taught in our Major American Fiction Writers courses as well.

Richard Wright's Native Son, published in 1940, is much better known than Cane and frequently has appeared in traditional American literature courses. Historically, the work is considered as the one which closed the Harlem Renaissance, if the Depression date is not set as the end of this exciting literary and artistic period in Black history. Wright, a pivotal figure in both American and Black American literature, is recognized as the father of the Black American novel, culminates what is referred to as Black protest literature, and looks forward to the more militant Black writers of the sixties. In American literature, he is assigned to the school of naturalism and is identified with the social conscious, proletarian writers of the thirties.

Critics, though unable to agree on the reasons, acclaim Native Son a powerful novel. One answer to account for its power is that it provides one of the best fictional reports of the racial situation in America and that it is given through the voice of the oppressed rather than the oppressor. Certainly, we admit that all Blacks are not Bigger Thomases and have not responded to their American experience as this character, but Native Son forces us to imagine the pain, humiliation, dehumanization, and perhaps anger that most Blacks have suffered or are suffering. As James Baldwin points out, "No American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull."[9]

Also, many Black writers have been accused of being too close to the folk tradition, too much of a propagandist, a sociologist, or protestor. In Native Son, Wright does make use of the Black folk myths and symbols; he is a sociologist and a protestor; but he is a self-conscious artist and epitomizes the Black artist's concern with being an artist, while at the same, using his art to address the problems of Black people.

Finally, Wright's novel raises many questions which make it excellent for teaching. The author's portrayal of Black life, the artistic unity of the novel, its unresolved ending, the ideology of the work - is it existensial, Marxist or other - the propaganda or non-propaganda of Book III and the central meaning of the work: is it an account of a Black urban youth being stifled, defeated, and destroyed by an unjust, oppressive society or is it a powerful, bold stance of a Black hero, "the big bad nigger" who insists on defining the meaning of his own life, are only a few of the controversies that the novel has provoked. That such issues continue to be debated is a tribute to the novel's artistic power, accounts for its endurance and makes it a rich work for class discussion.

Though enthusiastically received in both literary and popular circles upon it publication, Native Son became a victim to America's periodic neglect of Black American writers, but during the 60's, it too enjoyed a revival.

Native Son and Cane are only two works of Black Americans which deserve to be considered as masterpieces. If teachers need other additional choices, may I suggest, among others, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain, Margaret Walker's Jubilee, Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Langston's Hughes Not Without Laughter, and Malcolm X The Autobiography of Malcolm X. The list could be much longer, but the primary appeal is that we, as American literature teachers not let it happen again.

There is no need for American students to have to continue "to discover" Black American writers over and over. We should not have to spend valuable time every ten or twenty years justifying and educating teachers about the literary contributions of Black Americans. Let's try to keep Blacks in American literature.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert L. Allen, "Politics of the Attack on Black Studies," The Black Scholar, 6 (September 1974), 2-7.

[2]Nick Aaron Ford, Black Studies: Threat-or-Challenge, (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1973), p. 151.

[3]Houston A. Baker, Jr. Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture, (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1972), p. 58.

[4]Jean Toomer, Cane (N. Y.: University Place Press, Liveright Publishing Cort, 1967) and Richard Wright, Native Son (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1940).

[5]Darwin T. Turner, In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp. 14, 25.

[6]Bernard W. Bell, "Jean Toomer's Cane: Portrait of the Artist as High Priest of Soul," Black World, 22 (September 1974), 5.

[7]For a discussion of Toomer's autobiography, dilemma as an artist and man, see Darwin Turner's In a Minor Chord, pp. 4 - 11, pp. 30 - 36.

[8]Roger Whitlow, Black American Literature: A Critical History (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams' & Company, 1974), pp. 82 - 83.

[9]James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," Partisan Review, XVIII (November - December 1951), 678, reprinted in James Baldwin, Notes of A Native Son (Boston, 1955), pp. 24 - 25.